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PAKISTAN—THE MOST DANGEROUS PLACE IN THE WORLD

Dr. Larry P. Goodson
U.S. Army War College

Pakistan is the most dangerous foreign policy problem facing the United States for five major reasons. First, Pakistan is a nuclear country, with at least 60 nuclear warheads (according to both journalistic and unclassified U.S. Government sources), a regular supply of fissile material with which to make more, multiple delivery systems, and a history as a known proliferator. Pakistan developed nuclear weapons because of its long and bloody history with its bigger next-door neighbor, India, to which it has lost four major military conflicts since 1947. They have not squared off again since the Kargil Conflict of 1999, and the world holds its breath over their next spat.

Second, Pakistan has become the epicenter of Islamist extremism, and its militants and suicide bombers come from all over the world. They threaten Pakistan's domestic security, the U.S.-led effort to stabilize and rebuild Afghanistan, India and the broader region, and the wider world.

Third, Pakistan is a teeming Third World country of substantial poverty and underdevelopment, beset by moribund socioeconomic institutions and guided by feudal elites whose conception of modernity are often benighted. In terms of daily life, this translates for most Pakistanis into significant insecurity as they face crime and social decay, deteriorating household economic conditions, and corrupt government officials who prey on their misery. Upward mobility is a barren concept for many, only to be achieved by emigration.

Fourth, Pakistan's hopelessly ineffective government has little chance of fixing its domestic problems, saddled as it is with a crushing current accounts imbalance that threatens to topple the country's macroeconomic stability.

Fifth, some 80 percent of supplies for the U.S.-led military coalition in Afghanistan flow through or over Pakistani territory, which also serves as a base of operations for some of the anti-coalition fighters who attack the U.S. forces in Afghanistan. It is the confluence of all of these problems that makes Pakistan so dangerous, so significant, and so challenging for the United States. Just as there are five major reasons for this, there are five significant factors that everyone needs to understand about the place.

The sixth-largest country in the world with a population of some 175 million people, Pakistan is a fragile polity that was constructed along ethnolinguistic lines. Originally Pakistan was founded to be a homeland for South Asia's Muslims, and thus it had an

Eastern Wing of Bengalis (which would become Bangladesh after the 1971 war that produced its independence) and a Western Wing (centered on the Punjab) that is present-day Pakistan. This country has four provinces, each built on a predominant ethnolinguistic group. The Punjab is the heart of the country, with more than 90 million people, two-thirds of whom are Punjabi, and many of whom are the country's business, military, and governmental elites. The southern Sindh province has 50 million people, with 60 percent being Sindhi. Pakistan's largest urban area, Karachi, is the Sindhi capital, containing some 20 million people, including most of the country's Urdu-speaking Muhajirs (refugees from the 1947 Partition with India). The other two provinces are the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), with two-thirds of its 21 million people being Pashtun; and Balochistan, with its 10 million people almost equally divided between Baloch and Pashtuns. The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) lie between the NWFP and the Afghan border (and just north of Balochistan), and have a population of some 5.5 million, almost all of whom are Pashtuns. Pakistan has a federal republican system of government, at least when its constitution is in effect, but it is a fragile federalism.

Pakistan's huge population is also one of the world's fastest growing, which creates an enormous youth bulge that exacerbates the pressure felt by moribund social and economic institutions. With over 60 percent of its population under the age of 25, Pakistan struggles, even in good economic years, to keep the 24 to 40 percent of its population living in poverty from rising. High fuel prices combined with political instability to drive inflation over 25 percent in 2008, and the resultant capital flight, trade deficit, and currency devaluation caused the near default by Pakistan's government that prompted a $7.6 billion IMF bailout in November 2008. Pakistan's massive macroeconomic crisis is surpassed only by the staggering microeconomic conditions of the nation's poor, whose often squalid living conditions are exacerbated by high rates of entrenched corruption, the world's largest population of heroin users (estimated as up to 5 million people), and increasing criminality and violence.

If these conditions were not problem enough, Pakistan endures political pendulum swings that make the incessant finger-pointing between Democrats and Republicans sound like the kindergarten antics of cranky babies. In just over 60 years of independence, Pakistan has had five-and-a-half constitutions (counting the 8th and 17th Amendments to the current constitution as a half constitution), four periods of military rule, a civil war that led to a disastrous dismemberment, and at least four military defeats by India.

The civilian political institutions are badly underdeveloped and atrophied, while Pakistan has the seventh-largest military in the world dominated by an overweening Army whose secret budgets are never subject to parliamentary scrutiny. The military's role has gradually shifted over time to more of a praetorian state-building maintenance of its domestic position than a national security provider. Still, the massive military budgets made possible the development of a nuclear arsenal, which was announced to the world with a series of nuclear tests in 1998. Meanwhile, Pakistan's political elites have been notoriously kleptocratic and disconnected from average citizens, choosing to

advance their interests through political parties that are nothing more than glorified patronage organizations.

A fourth factor is geopolitical, as Pakistan finds itself engaged in a 21st-century Great Game of epic proportions. It is dominated by its resented "Big Brother," India, from whom it was separated at birth, and with which it is engaged in an ongoing existential struggle, especially over the disputed area of Kashmir. Pakistan's most reliable ally on the world stage is China, which also appears hungry for its resources, most notably its large natural gas deposits in arid Balochistan. Through carrots rather than sticks, China appears to have achieved the fabled prize of a warm-water port that so shaped Imperial Russian geopolitical designs of an earlier age, as China essentially designed, built, and is the primary tenant of the port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea.

The United States is Pakistan's far-away, fair-weather friend, locked in a decades-long transactional relationship that satisfies neither partner's desires. Pakistan is the dark side of the moon to the average American who cannot tell you one salient fact about the country, its people, their customs or history—nothing! So we use Pakistan as a bulwark against whatever goes boo in the night in that part of the world, paying their price of the moment, and then walking away when the crisis is resolved.

Now that a new Great Game has erupted, with the United States playing the role of Great Britain while a resurgent Russia and a rising China play the other great powers in a field crowded with lesser, but still significant, players like Iran, India, and Pakistan, transactional relationships have become more complex and harder to calculate correctly. All the players pursue their own interests, and the field spills out of Afghanistan and into neighboring areas such as Pakistan.

Finally, Americans must understand a few basics about the role Islam plays and does not play in Pakistan. Like Israel, Pakistan was founded to be a religious homeland, in this case for South Asia's Muslim community when British India was partitioned in 1947. The only problem is that Pakistan's predominantly Muslim population has never been able to agree on quite what role Islam should play there. Pakistan's Islam has been many things, all at once, to its people, influenced as it has been by the Islamic seminaries of northern India, the austere Sunni Salafism of the Arabian Peninsula, the Shia' seminaries of Iran and southern Iraq, the Sufi brotherhoods of Central Asia and the Middle East, and the syncretic melding of tribal codes of the mountains.

The unsettled status of Islam in Pakistani society played a big role in the delay in passing its first constitution and ultimately led to the rise of Islamization movements of varying intensity and success from the late 1950s onward. With the anti-Soviet Jihad in Afghanistan during the 1980s, Pakistan became the host of the world's largest refugee population and a frontline state against Soviet expansionism, all of which occurred while the broader Islamic World was undergoing a cultural war within. For Pakistan, this meant that the anti-Soviet mujahideen cast their resistance in religious terms, and, gradually, secular liberals were squeezed out of Afghan and Pashtun public space. Now that contest for the public space extends more and more into metropolitan Pakistan.

Understanding Pakistan's five factors may help us better understand Pakistan's five problems, but what about solutions? Unfortunately, few good solutions for Pakistan

exist. Its declining socioeconomic conditions occur now in a society far less resilient than before the creation of its large youth bulge, burgeoning Islamist militants, or development of a large, quasi-modern, and nuclear-tipped military.

Three interconnected and equally important strategic strands must be interwoven in a deft and artful manner if the United States is to have any hope of success in Pakistan. First, it is imperative that Pakistan's immediate crises be averted; especially lowering the temperature with India, as well as forestalling widespread collapse of the economy. Particularly in regard to the latter factor, recent requests for emergency funds from Congress should be supported and the monies thereby disbursed, targeted to do the most obvious good possible. The U.S. relief effort following Pakistan's massive 2005 earthquake is instructive, as the good will it engendered was tangible and has proven enduring in the mountainous northern areas of the country. Second, we must establish and maintain a better transactional relationship in the medium term, since such a relationship will continue during the next few years. How do we achieve this? The truth is that the Pakistanis have more leverage over us than we do over them. We want them to do things for us that they view as inimical to their national interests. We offer little in return, and the Chinese loom in the background as an alternative, so it is difficult to have much leverage. Still, it is possible to target aid on the economic sector and to the poor in ways that can be measured, and we should do so. Finally, it is only possible for Pakistan to become a true strategic partner to the United States if it changes, as the United States is unlikely to tolerate as a partner a country that hosts terrorists and has limited resources, markets, or other things of value for which we are willing to put up with the negatives.

Beyond that, Pakistan needs to change for its own sake, as it seems headed toward a societal meltdown, state failure, and/or revolution if current conditions continue. Structural reforms are needed to long-standing political, economic, and social institutions so that Pakistan can have a healthier society. Such reforms will be strongly resisted by the very elites that are our current partners in the transactional relationship, but we must push the process of reform anyway because the cycle of transactional relationships has gotten progressively worse over time, and now Pakistan is a nuclear state facing revolution.

Above all, we must realize that the kind of change Pakistan needs cannot be wrought quickly. If we want a strategic partnership, we must prepare ourselves for an enduring relationship, which means that we must become interested in Pakistan, its neighborhood, and its problems. Perhaps that is our greatest challenge.

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